

Sialia sialis—BLUEBIRD.

Common permanent resident. Nests throughout section.

The migration notes in the foregoing list are based on a tabulation covering a period of sixteen years and the general averages are shown in each case.

SOME IOWA OWL NOTES

BY FRED J. PIERCE, WINTHIOP, IOWA

The Screech Owl is the commonest representative of the Owl family in this region, and is undoubtedly of extreme value to the farmer as a pest destroyer. He is seldom seen in the hours of the day, but at night makes his presence known by his wavering, mournful cry, which is pleasing music to the ear of a professed lover of nature. Why anyone should think this weird and gripping voice from the night disagreeable is hard to understand, yet many people do. Retiring in habit, this bird seems to have few objectionable qualities, and is, therefore, a neighbor to be encouraged, rather than one to be shunned.

Some time ago I described the effective work done by a Screech Owl in ridding our farm buildings of English Sparrows during the winter of 1919-20.* During the past winter (1921-22) similar work was done by an industrious and not too timid Owl—perhaps the previous visitant.

This Screech Owl was first seen in the large mow of our barn, after a severe snowstorm in mid-December, and it visited it frequently thereafter. The Sparrows' numerous roosting-places in the haymow and nearby silo chute were no longer safe and, judging from the small size of our English Sparrow flock, the Owl's appetite for Sparrows was a very hearty one.

For several years the ladder rungs inside the silo chute have been a preferred reposing quarter of the Sparrows. When not molested a hundred or so would congregate there to spend the night. My father and I have often gone there after dark and killed numbers of them by climbing the steps and knocking them over with a club, while a lantern was held below to bewilder them with the light. It was fairly easy to dispatch the birds with a well directed blow. In former winters we have used these means to keep the Sparrow flock reduced, but the past winter the Screech Owl included the chute in his list of hunting grounds and the Sparrows were left little cover. A

* The Screech Owl as a Sparrow trap. *Bird-Lore*, Nov.-Dec. 1920, p. 350.

broken window pane made the chute easy of entrance. Another of the Sparrows' haunts is our chicken house. One morning, upon entering this building, we found the Owl there, flying about over the chickens' heads and causing the greatest of confusion, apparently frightening himself fully as much as he was terrorizing the chicken population. He finally collected his wits and escaped through an open window.

The late Dr. Bert Heald Bailey, in his "Raptorial Birds of Iowa" (1918), said that the Screech Owl's "food consists very largely of mice; although sometimes small birds are taken, especially the English Sparrow and Blue Jay." Is it not possible that the Screech Owl catches a few native Sparrows, or can it discriminate between the English and American species?

One afternoon in January (1922) I heard a company of Crows making a great din in a wood close at hand, and, thinking I might catch sight of a Hawk or Owl which was being "mobbed," I followed the flight line taken by Crows which were hastening to the scene of excitement. As I approached, the Crows departed, and I found a Barred Owl jumping from branch to branch in the tops of some conifers, trying to keep one eye on the fleeing Crows and the other on me. He did not leave, however, probably taking me as the less of two evils, and soon settled in a tree over my head.

The Owl's back was toward me when he became quiet and I wished to get a better look at his face; he did not seem at all inclined to turn around, either. Soon I imitated the Screech Owl's wavering whistle, thinking I could perhaps make him turn around. A moment later, by chance, I dropped my eyes to a lower plane and I was *greatly* astonished to see a Screech Owl eyeing me from a branch a few yards away and only a little higher than my head, as if to say, "That was a poor imitation, Pierce—you need some lessons." How he came to be there I can but conjecture. He must have flown there when he heard my whistle, although the flapping of his wings did not catch my eye. If he had been sitting on the limb when I came I think I should have seen him, although his plumage (red) and the bark of the tamarack did much to conceal him. Both of the Owls were well camouflaged when sitting directly in front of the tree trunks, and after looking away it was hard to pick their outlines from the bark. The ground was covered with icy snow and the bright sun shining upon it produced a blinding effect. The Screech Owl's eyes were narrowed to mere slits.

In a little while the Screech Owl flew to a dead tamarack, the upper half of which was broken off and gone. This trunk is filled with holes and cavities made by Flickers and Red-headed Woodpeckers year after year, and into one of these the Owl disappeared. Probably one or more of these cavities form the quarters of him and his mate—if he has one.

This tract of trees is evidently the year-around home for at least one pair of Screech Owls, for nearly every summer the young can be seen there. Watching the rows of half grown youngsters perched on some branch in this tract in the spring months has furnished me considerable amusement. They are so serious looking and apparently motionless except when they turn their heads completely around to stare at one from behind. In this ludicrous position one might imagine that Mother Nature had put their heads on backward. The parent Owls are usually near their young when they are out on these "airings." Occasionally, when one goes into the woods at dusk in the late spring evenings he is reminded of the presence of a Screech Owl brood by the old ones swooping down at him and uttering peculiar noises as they glide by his head. On these occasions the Screech Owl displays an amount of aggressiveness I have not found in his nature at other times. On many nights, in the summer or fall, Screech Owls have come and perched on the roof of our house or sat in the eave troughs, where they give their calls, as if they were somewhere deep in the woods.

The occurrence of the Barred Owl, in the immediate vicinity of Winthrop, is rather rare, but this is doubtless due to the lack of any dense timber within several miles. I usually make one record of this species each year, but not oftener.

My first record of the Barn Owl is April 13, 1922. That morning, when I went into the silo to throw down the supply of ensilage for the day, I found the Barn Owl sitting on one of the timbers which support the roof, about twenty feet above me. Although considerably alarmed at my noisy work below, the Owl did not fly out, but perhaps this was because it could not find the place where it had entered. The bird remained there all day; a pair of pigeons which had their nest inside were afraid to come into the silo. According to Anderson's "Birds of Iowa" (1907), the Barn Owl "very rarely appears north of the middle line of the state."

March-April, 1922.